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ABSTRACT

A theory of semantics focusing on relationships between meaning and sound patterns in language evolution is proposed. Using cognate sets from traditional comparative studies of closely-related languages in well-defined language families, the theory addresses the use and shifting of language components. The theory begins with the ego attempting to make sense of the environment by naming, organizing both abstract and concrete elements into manageable categories. The first human frame of reference is of body in relation to environment: bodily parts and natural elements. Cognate sets in comparative studies often relate to space and object shapes as seen in space. Primitive morphemes can also be classified by composition; much vocabulary relates to natural elements of earth, air, fire, and water. Certain sounds are basic, unchanging from language to language throughout history; similarly, certain meanings based on primitive elements and needs are stable across time. Proliferation of vocabulary results from derivations of primordial meanings. With societal change, identification of primordial morphemes may be lost. However, studying direction of change in derivational meanings can give insight into human nature and categories, and cognitive processes. In sum, primitive morphemes are particles scattered through the semantic system of a single language and, in time, all derived languages. (MSE)

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A SEMANTIC FRAME WORK RECONSTRUCTED FROM COMPARATIVE LINGUISTICS

Mary Ritchie KEY

Traditionally, comparative work has been done on the basis of observations about Indo-European languages. At the present time enough comparative studies have been done on non-Western languages to permit us to make observations which are not limited to Western thinking. The study of meaning in these other languages gives us insight into the cognitive processes of the human mind, not limited to our own kind of thinking. Surprisingly, many of the semantic structures that one sees in non-Western languages, can also be observed in Indo-European languages. Here is a further opportunity to look at universals of language--this time at the semantic level.

I am proposing a theory of semantics that will unfold the interlocking relationships of meaning parallel to the interlocking relationships of sounds between evolving systems. The comparisons are ensconsed in a network of semantic relationships. This is not a study of etymologies; it is a theory of relationships based on facts of language. The language data used are taken from the cognate sets of traditional comparative studies of closely related languages in well-defined language families, that is, the established relationships. While the actual observations set forth in this paper are from undisputed language families, I propose that we can also discover something about distant relationships and sketch out possible connections. This semantic theory can also be used as a measure of evaluating hypotheses concerning language relationships and classifications. Perhaps more importantly, this theory of language change, by looking at meanings in cognate sets, can elucidate cognitive processes, explore semiotic systems, and illuminate the nature of categories and perceptions.

The theory addresses the utilizing and shifting of the components of langurge. Meaning is basic to these component parts--the "building blocks" which are the pristine expressions within a language system.

Our starting point is the EGO, a thinking, feeling, willing organism, who is attempting to make sense of the environment by naming the things in it. In a thought-provoking discussion on language and the evolution of human consciousness, Smith (1985:7) notes that "only humans have a stream of internal dialogue between the senses, reporting on the outside world, and the person, the *self*, the *me*." This thinking human being organizes the building blocks into manageable categories which include and encompass everything perceived in the ambient, or imagined in the abstract.

For purposes of analysis, language is reducible into component parts. The defineable building blocks can be organized around the needs and expressions of the EGO. This can be seen in the *relationships* that the EGO has with others in the environment, as well as with the natural setting in space and time. The relationships with other humans are the kinship systems of the various cultures in the world.

The human being's pristine awareness of the world (conscious or subconscious) is in

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reference of the body to the environment--how one sees and hears and feels the air, the water, the ground, and the mountains around. The bodily repertory contains basic elements in language; I am calling these the corporeal morphemes: the head, the face, the foot. By extension these are used to talk about the experiences of life, psychological and physical. The natural elements are named: the foot of the mountain, the side of the mountain, the footways or paths, the arms (branches) of the trees and rivers. In time, when inventions are produced, the corporeal building blocks are extended to artifacts: the facing, the eye of the needle, the pedal.

round: eye, umbilicus
pointed: nose, finger
string-shaped: vein, tendon, intestine
branch, angle: ankle, neck, joint
meander, undulating: wavy hair
prominence: jaw
mound: tumor, boil
protuberance: ear, horn
speck: dandruff

Space: up, top: head
below, foundation: foot

Shape Morphemes and Corporeal = Primordial Morphemes

The bodily parts and natural elements are dealt with by the EGO in relationship to space and time. It is extraordinary how many cognate sets in comparative linguistic studies have to do with space and the shapes of objects as seen in space. This is dealt with following in *"The Shape of Language"*, where shapes in nature are correlated with linguistic classifiers and with morphemes that carry meanings of shape and motion. Every primitive morpheme is defined by a particular set of distinctive features. The structure of the building blocks of language resonates with the structure of the natural elements. The distinctive features of 'round, circle' define its shape--the geometric dimensions. When a distinctive feature pushes the circle to another dimension, it becomes a sphere, a mound, or a ball. When 'round, circle' is combined with the distinctive features of 'motion', new vocabulary items are added to the repertory: 'twirl, spiral, whirlwind'.

In nature	*In language*
sphere	round, circle, globe, ball, corona, wreath, bubble, foam, drops of water
hexagon, polygon	[no examples in language]
spiral, helix	twist, turn, return, wrap, twitch, vine, coil
meander	braid, weave, worm/snake crawl, flowing river, wavy, scalloped, drops of water meandering down a smooth surface
branch	angle, fork, hook, fork of river, trail through woods

The Shape of Language

From another perspective, primitive morphemes can also be classified by composition. In pristine times people used the materials about them to construct their artifacts. The composition of these elements dictated their use. The rock became an important tool because of its hardness, and words reflecting this quality show up in the the cognate sets. The hard quality was useful for hunting and for grinding.

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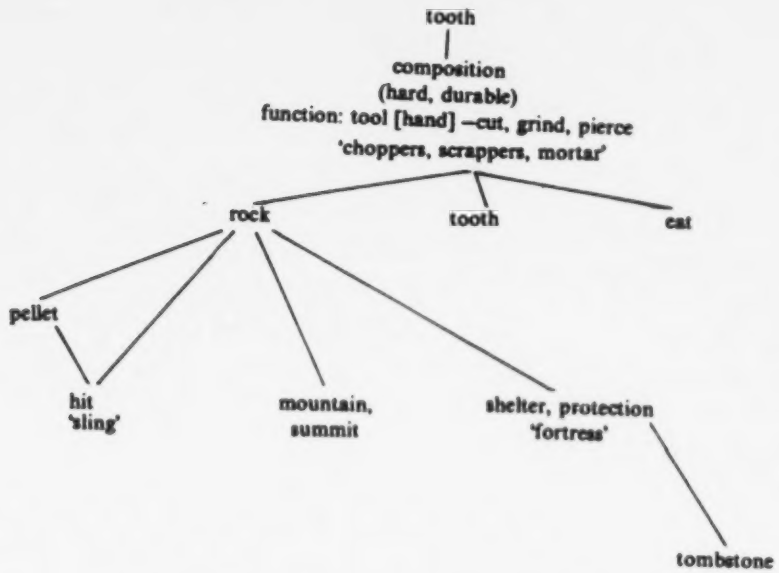

Composition

The cognate sets in comparative linguistic studies show a large proportion of vocabulary that has to do with the natural elements of **"Earth, Air, Fire, and Water"**, and I am labeling as such the section that deals with these elements. Lastly, having established a foundation of linguistic building blocks on the physical parts of the world, the EGO now extends these notions to the psychological world, the world that he and she perceive. This goes from the somatic to the psyche, in the section on *perception,*. which comprises terms for colors, flavors, sounds, textures, and emotions. Primitive morphemes are now used figuratively to apply to psychological conditions: "I can't face it", "Get off my back!".

Primitive morphemes are of very long standing, and elsewhere I am dealing with the matter of stability in language in a study that treats Hittite resemblances in present-day languages (Key 1985a). A few examples are:

	Hittite	*English*
heart	kard-	heart, cardiac
knee	genu	genuflect (through Latin)
lick, lap	lip-	lap, lip
eat	ed-	eat
sip	sarap-	sip
		Spanish
foot	pata-	pata (animal foot)
die	mer-	mori-r
cough	tuhhai-	tose-r
horn	karawar	cuerno/kwerno/

Two things stand out clearly: certain sounds are basic and do not undergo much

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change from language to language throughout the millenia; and certain meanings based on primitive elements and needs are stable throughout the millenia. The proliferation of vocabulary results from derivations of the primordial meanings. 'Nose', for example, is a pristine morpheme; and from it are derived other vocabulary, such as 'point, end, arrow', in a chain of related meanings that form the semantic structures of languages of the world. The derivational meanings include cultural concepts and learned behavior, as the societies spread out into varied environments and chosen activities.

As societies separated in prehistorical times, identification of primordial morphemes may have become irretrievably lost. 'Coronary' how refers to the heart, though there is nothing in the word which represents the primitive notion of the body. If the history of this word had been lost, we might not easily identify the actual morpheme 'corona' which has to do with an encircling garland. In addition to changing meanings in metaphorical and figurative senses, there are changes of meaning in cognate sets that have to do with class inclusion. The primitive morpheme 'knee' may change to 'foot' in a derived language. 'Air' ('blow') may come to mean 'smell'. In a related language 'blow' may cross-over to mean 'inflate'. I will call these changes *cross-overs*.

I believe that the direction of change in the various derivational meanings is also structured. Studying these movements through semantic space can tell us something about human nature and categories, about cognitive processes, and how the brain processes information (Delbrück 1986; Hart et al. 1985). The combinations of primitive morphemes can extend the vocabulary indefinitely, making as many new languages that human beings can possibly think up. I believe that these neologisms do not occur randomly. Discovering the structural development of these semantic combinations is a matter of defining the cognitive processes that human beings use in labeling the environment.

Primitive morphemes act as particles that become scattered throughout the semantic system of a single language, and, with time, become dispersed throughout all the languages that derive. It is as though a large bag of colored marbles is held in the possession of the original language. Half of the marbles are colored red, the basic marble-color, and the other half are various colors. The marbles are mixed well, and by handfuls the marbles are scattered abroad in different directions. A new language proceeds from each handful. Because there were so many red marbles, each language receives a portion of red, (a statistical probability), along with varying mixes of other colors. If there were just a few turquoise marbles in the original bag, then some languages would not receive any turquoise marbles. If there were quite a few yellow marbles, several languages would receive a generous portion of yellow. All the languages would continue to reflect something of the original red. It is possible that this is what we see now in languages: a remnant of original vestiges in the languages that reflect the original red, and the sister and cousin languages exhibiting a vast array of combinations of shadings and colorings.

The semantic study set forth here presents a way of comparing related languages that illuminates the cognitive processes used in communicating. In analyzing the cognate sets of closely related languages, it is possible to reconstruct a semantic framework out of the changes of meaning in evolving languages. This is a preliminary study, which I believe has potential for further understanding how the brain works, as human beings strive to label the environment and the new situations and artifacts encountered. It is clear, even at these beginning stages, that symbolism plays an important part in the resemblances found in languages of the world. An obvious example is the set of vocabulary items for the element 'air'. The manner of articulation is labial for the word 'blow' in an extraordinary proportion of words in cognate sets, and this labial articulation extends to other vocabulary items in the semantic sets. If all peoples of the earth have the same type of brain, it should not be surprising that the various cultures

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perceive and categorize the world about them in similar ways.

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